

Wake Forest University

CLASSICS 381: SEMINAR IN CLASSICAL STUDIES
ANCIENT PASTORAL AND ITS RECEPTION

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INTRODUCTION:

When most of us think of pastoral, we may think first of an idealized, idyllic version of the simple rural life – the version that Marie Antoinette embraced when she dressed as a “shepherdess” in her rustic retreat in the grounds of the palace of Versailles. Pastoral literature has a reputation in many quarters for artificiality, presenting a “prettified” account of picturesque shepherds that fails to acknowledge the harsher realities of life close to the land. In fact, from the very beginning of the genre, ancient and modern writers of pastoral have explored the tensions between the potential beauty of a life in the countryside and the reality of poverty and vulnerability. Real-life land confiscations in Italy during the Roman civil wars of the first century BC inspired an undercurrent of loss and grief in Virgil’s *Eclogues*, the foundational texts of the Western pastoral tradition; from ancient to modern times, pastoral writers have highlighted such problems as the injustice of forced labor and the disastrous consequences of the enclosure of common grazing lands. As we will find in this course, pastoral is not just a set of conventional settings, topics, and images. Rather, it is a mode of writing about loss and dissatisfaction that acknowledges a distance between the writer (or reader) and the experience of vulnerable pastoral figures. By creating this distance, pastoral creates a space where readers can safely engage with contemporary social, political, and environmental problems without direct confrontation.¹

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In this course we will look at pastoral themes in Greek and Roman literature (read in English translation) and their reception by later writers. From the *Odyssey* and the Homeric *Hymns* to the bucolic poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, we will examine how classical poets (and the novelist Longus) imagine herdsmen – figures who live at the margins of society and of the landscape, who belong to a world that can be characterized as a peaceful idyll or a dangerous wilderness. We will consider ways in which ancient writers of epic and tragedy as well as bucolic explore the tension between an idealized vision of the simple pastoral world and its compromised reality. We will discuss what it means for a poem to be pastoral in the Western tradition and will read a selection of works from the Renaissance to the twentieth century that use inherited pastoral forms to address topics such as rural poverty and the horrors of modern war. Through readings from secondary literature, we will examine modern critics’ analyses of the pastoral genre. We will also investigate the modern reception of classical literature.

¹ I have added this section to introduce explicitly the key concept that pastoral offers a unique way to explore issues of sustainability both in ancient and in contemporary culture.

As we develop our definition of what it means for a work of literature to be pastoral, we will explore potentially pastoral places in our own environment. We will visit our own Reynolda Gardens as we reflect on the different ways in which wild nature, land used for grazing or growing food, and pleasure gardens are present in the pastoral tradition. If circumstances permit, we will also visit a local goat farm to see one form in which the pastoral life is lived in North Carolina today. We will compare these environments with industrial livestock rearing practices (explored via readings and online videos) and with the experiences of herders around the world today facing dispossession and the effects of climate change. We will consider how our expectations about pastoral life relate to realities and examine how these expectations are reinforced or challenged by the media, political rhetoric, and other cultural forces.²

COURSE AIMS:

You will read fundamental texts of the classical tradition from a variety of genres. Through reading both primary and secondary literature, you will hone skills in close reading and critical analysis. By the end of the course, you should be able to recognize intertextuality and analyze the ways in which it changes your reading of a work of literature; summarize a scholarly argument accurately and relate it to other ideas; find secondary sources for a research paper; and use textual evidence correctly to support your arguments in writing and in discussion.

Through reading and analyzing pastoral literature in ancient and modern genres, you will develop an understanding of the voice, tone, subjects, and themes that make the pastoral mode distinctive. You will hone your ability to identify rhetorical strategies that writers and speakers use to create emotional effects, both in literature and in other contexts. By the end of the course, you should be able to distinguish idealizing depictions of pastoral (or rural or simple) life from complex realities. You should also be able to recognize ways in which the “distancing” pastoral mode has been used to explore political and social problems of inequity, land use, and environmental degradation, and you should be able to situate modern social and environmental problems in this historical tradition. Achieving these goals will help you work toward achieving your full potential both as a reader and as a conscientious citizen, aware of the complex factors that contribute to social and environmental problems and sensitive to rhetorical manipulation.³

COURSE POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS:

Classics 381 is a fast-paced, demanding course that requires commitment and engagement. **You are required to attend all classes and to contribute** to our discussions. You are responsible for notifying me of excusable absences in advance (or as soon as possible afterwards in the case of illness). Absences may be excused for the following reasons:

² This paragraph outlines the components of the course that will help students explore the relationship between pastoral landscapes and ways of life and issues of sustainability. In particular, the revised version of the course will aim to develop a sense of place and the ability to differentiate between types of “natural” environment through first-person experience and conscious reflection.

³ This paragraph has been added to make explicit how reading pastoral can help students understand issues of sustainability and how they are addressed (or not addressed) in cultures including our own. I aim to articulate one key goal of the course: to encourage students to approach rhetoric surrounding social and environmental issues thoughtfully, aware of rhetorical manipulation that obscures social and environmental realities.

- 1) Religious observance (you must notify me in advance);
- 2) Illness, with a doctor's note from Student Health;
- 3) Intercollegiate sporting events (you must notify me in advance);
- 4) Graduate school, fellowship, or job interview (you must notify me in advance);
- 5) Personal or family emergency, with a note from an appropriate university official.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

All work submitted for a grade must be your own independent work. You must appropriately cite any ideas drawn from scholarly works. If you are in any doubt as to what a certain situation requires, please be in touch with me (or with the Writing Center). I will be delighted to help you work through the question.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS:

If you have a disability that may require an accommodation in this course, please contact the Learning Assistance Center (758-5929) within the first 2 weeks of the semester. I will be glad to work with you to make any necessary arrangements, such as extra time on tests, but I can only do so if you provide a letter from the Learning Assistance Center.

ASSESSMENT:

This is a **writing-** and **analysis-**heavy course. In a seminar, active engagement in and contribution to class **discussions** will be essential. To make sure that everyone comes well equipped to participate in our discussion, you will be asked to prepare your thoughts on each week's reading by answering a few brief questions in a few sentences. You will submit your answers online through Sakai. These will be graded pass/fail based on whether they show me that you have completed and understood the reading.

Each student will be asked to prepare and deliver a short (10-minute) **presentation** on a scholarly article in **two** class meetings. You will find each of your articles, in consultation with me. Presentations must be **concise**. You should prepare an **outline** of the article, including the key arguments of the author and main pieces of supporting evidence. You may include brief quotations if you wish, but most importantly you should distinguish the **argument**. Please bring copies of your outline to distribute as a handout in class or email it to me by 11am on the day of class.

In addition to the brief answers to the reading questions, there will be reflective, analytical, and creative **writing assignments**, for which you will receive detailed instructions and rubrics in due course. These will include a short (3-5-page) **essay** on Theocritus and Virgil and a longer (8-10-page) **paper** on the relationship of one post-classical author to Theocritus or Virgil. Three further assignments will give you the opportunity to think about how pastoral relates to the world you live in: a one-page **reflection** on "pastoral" environments, a one-page **analysis** of pastoral imagery in advertising, and a longer **analytical or creative assignment** on a contemporary social or environmental problem interpreted through the lens of pastoral. For more information on these assignments, see below.⁴

⁴ Although the original version of the course included discussions of pastoral imagery in advertising and popular culture (e.g., students were asked to bring in contemporary examples of pastoral texts, which

READINGS AND TOPICS WE WILL COVER:

Homer, *Iliad* (selections: pastoral similes in contexts of battle; vulnerable shepherds on the shield of Achilles)

Homer, *Odyssey* (supernatural, dangerous herders: Proteus, Polyphemus, Circe; morally polarized human herders: Eumaeus vs. Melanthius)

Homeric *Hymns* (Aphrodite, Hermes, and Pan)

Theocritus, *Idylls*

Virgil, *Eclogues*, *Georgics* book 3, *Aeneid* (selections: herdsmen start wars; pastoral similes in which Aeneas is a failed shepherd; the pastoral past of Rome; Aeneas receives his shield in a pastoral setting)

Horace and Tibullus (the pastoral idyll versus reality)

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (excerpts)

Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* (pastoral romance; dangers and vulnerabilities of the pastoral life; its moral contrast with city life)

Renaissance pastoral: Sannazaro (*Piscatory Eclogues*), Spenser, Shakespeare (*As You Like It*, *The Winter's Tale*)

17th-century pastoral: Milton (*Lycidas*), Marvell (the mower poems)

Augustan pastoral: Ambrose Philips (the target of satire), Pope, Swift, John Gay

18th-century pastoral and anti-pastoral: Stephen Duck (from *The Thresher's Labour*), Goldsmith (from *The Deserted Village*), Crabbe (from *The Village*), Burns, Blake, Gray

19th-century pastoral: Wordsworth, Keats, Hardy

20th-century pastoral: Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, C. Day Lewis, Robert Frost, Jean Toomer, Miklós Radnóti, Seamus Heaney

Problems we will consider in the pastoral tradition and the modern world:

Hunger and homelessness among workers who are victims of an economic system beyond their control

Poverty and hunger in our society: What are the causes of widespread hunger in Forsyth County (and the wider US) despite our high national agricultural production? Who uses SNAP (food stamps) and why?

How are animals treated in our food system? How do farmers and herders relate to the livestock they care for in different cultures?

Where are traditionally pastoral societies being displaced around the world? By what causes? What is happening to them?

Assignments that will explore these issues:

included video games and country songs) and offered students opportunities for creative writing in pastoral modes, I have revised the syllabus to make the goal of exploring the relevance of the pastoral tradition to contemporary social and environmental issues more explicit. These assignments aim to make students more critical thinkers and consumers of rhetoric, particularly concerning issues of sustainability, by analyzing ways in which their preconceptions and values are manipulated. The final assignment further aims to develop students' understanding of the ways in which rhetorical and artistic strategies in modern literature can be situated in a larger tradition.

1. After visiting an “idyllic/pastoral” landscape (eg, Reynolda Gardens, Old Salem Gardens) and an urban landscape in Winston Salem, write about your experience in the idyllic landscape, how it makes you feel, and why you might consider it pastoral; then consider how it compares with your experience in the non-idyllic landscape.
2. Find a commercial or advertisement (television, newspaper, or magazine; either for a product or for a political candidate or position) that uses pastoral imagery. Explain why you see the imagery as pastoral. What expectations about and emotional associations with rural life does it presume? What feelings does it try to create in the viewer? Is it engaging with realities of pastoral life?
3. Analytical option: Compare how a problem such as hunger, poverty, land confiscation, or environmental degradation is treated in a contemporary book, play, television show, or film with the treatment of a similar problem in one of the pastoral works you have read. Compare and contrast the formal structure, rhetorical techniques, and aims of the two works. How does the structure relate to the emotional effect on the reader or audience? How much sympathy or empathy is the reader or audience made to feel? Why and how?

OR

Creative option: Choose one of the contemporary social or political problems above and research it. Think about pastoral works we have read that address comparable issues. Then, using one or more of these pastoral works as a model, use a pastoral mode to write about the issue you have researched. How does a pastoral treatment of your topic differ in its form, its rhetorical techniques, and its goals from either a factual/journalistic article or an argumentative essay?⁵

⁵ This assignment responds to a larger goal of the course: for students to recognize and appreciate which aspects of experience literature (defined broadly) is uniquely equipped to explore - in particular, how literature cultivates empathy, allowing us to experience the perspectives of other people without confronting us and making us defensive – and how this makes literature a uniquely valuable tool as we approach social and economic problems.